

Prayer: What's the Point?  
Talking to God sermon series  
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I was always told that prayer was powerful, but I didn't realize just how powerful until I started working with youth groups. I learned that if I ever wanted to quiet down a rowdy group of teenagers, I only had to say three words: "Let us pray."

Those are indeed powerful words. They can quiet noisy Sunday School classrooms or bring a hush to a crowded sanctuary. The response we get when we say those words implies a certain amount of reverence for the act itself. I have heard many people say that the most powerful thing we can do as Christians is to pray. But that statement, as true as it is, assumes that we know how to pray in the first place.

As we start our Lenten sermon series on prayer, I want to talk about what it means to pray and why we do it. I suspect that most of us feeling a bit guilty because either we don't feel like we know how to pray or we don't believe we pray enough. A prayer life motivated by guilt isn't much of a prayer life. But to have a prayer life at all, we have to pray.

I sent out an email a few weeks ago asking some folks to contribute to our daily email prayers during Lent. Several people wrote back saying something like, "Well, I'm not really good at this kind of thing, but I'll give it a shot." And yet their prayers were beautiful. Why is the act of praying so intimidating? What keeps us from engaging in this activity so essential to our faith?

I think one of the biggest obstacles to praying is that we're afraid we're going to say the wrong thing, like Ben Stiller's character in "Meet the Parents." Stiller is meeting his fiancée's parents for the first time, and before dinner starts, the father, played by Robert Deniro, asks Stiller if he would say the prayer for the food. This was not a polite invitation. This was a future-son-in-law test. Stiller reluctantly agrees, and says, "Oh, dear God, thank you, you are such a good God to us. A kind and gentle and accommodating God, and we thank You oh sweet, sweet Lord of hosts for the smörgåsbord You have so aptly laid at our table this day, and each day, by day, day by day, by day oh dear Lord three things we pray to love Thee more dearly, to see Thee more clearly, to follow Thee more nearly, day, by day, by day. Amen."

OK, so that may not make be crocheted on any blankets, but it *was* a prayer. You may not think it was particularly eloquent or spiritual, but as soon as we start applying those kinds of categories to prayers I think we miss the point. The quality of prayers cannot be judged by length or vocabulary or rhyme scheme. Martin Luther said, "The fewer the words, the better the prayer." And author Anne Lamott wrote, "The two best prayers I know are 'help me, help me, help me' and 'thank you, thank you, thank you'."

There are a few things we need to understand about prayer and one of those is that there is no correct way to pray. If there were a standard formula for all our prayers, we wouldn't have the richness of variety. I've prayed with my eyes opened, eyes closed, head bowed, head lifted up to God, hands clasped, hands outstretched. I've said long prayers, short prayers, prayers with no words at all. We can pray while we're on our knees, but we can also pray while in our car, while waiting in the dentist's office, while taking a bath. Some people prefer silence, others like having music in the background. Some pray out loud, others in their head. There's no right or wrong way. We have to be careful not to get so caught up in the "how" of prayer that we miss

the “why” of prayer. Gandhi said, “It is better in prayer to have a heart without words than words without a heart.”

To be honest, no matter who’s praying, whether it’s Gandhi or Ben Stiller, it will never be perfect, because we are limited in what we can say by the words at our disposal. How do you authentically capture in words our feelings of gratitude or love or confession? Is “thank you” really good enough? Is “help me” really strong enough? Of course not. Every prayer falls short of matching God’s magnificence. That’s why Paul wrote in Romans, “The Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God’s will.” When we pray, we don’t have to get it right. A monk once said that, “For many years I was bothered by the thought that I was a failure at prayer. Then one day I realized I would always be a failure at prayer, and I’ve gotten along much better ever since.”

So there’s no perfect prayer, but thanks to the Spirit, there’s no such thing as a not-good-enough prayer, either. Through the Spirit, “help me” and “thank you” become the most eloquent of prayers. Through the Spirit, the naming of someone’s name becomes a prayer, like we do each Sunday morning. We name a lot of people, many of whom we don’t know. How can we pray for them if we don’t know what they need? Because God does. We name the name, and the Spirit fills in the blanks. Max Lucado says that “the power of prayer is not in the one praying but in the One who hears the prayer.”

While we can’t pray perfectly, we can pray effectively, and there are some guidelines for how to pray. One of those is the Lord’s Prayer given to us by Jesus, which will be looking at in a few weeks. Another is a acronym I was taught in seminary called the ACTS prayer. ACTS stands for adoration, confession, thanksgiving and supplication. In other words, when you pray you say how much you love God, you confess where you’ve fallen short, you thank God for your blessings, and you ask God to respond to your needs and the needs of others. If you aren’t sure how to pray, the ACTS model is a good place to start.

No matter how we pray, it’s important to note our lack of eloquence or expertise doesn’t make our prayers any less potent. Prayer is powerful, but not just for silencing a crowd. In our scripture reading from Mark, Jesus says that prayer has the power to move mountains if we believe that what we pray for will actually happen. And that’s a key part of praying. You don’t hear too many prayers that say, “Dear God, I really like life right now. Don’t change a thing.” People often pray because something is out of whack, something in life is not as it is supposed to be. We don’t pray, “Let Grace stay sick” or “Let people stay hungry.” We ask God to change the situation, or to help us change it, or we thank God for changing it. “Dear God, heal Grace.” “Dear Lord, show me how to help others.” “Dear God, thank you for Ken’s successful surgery.”

One of the reasons we pray is that prayer is our way of recognizing that the something needs to be done and we can’t do it ourselves. That doesn’t mean we should pray to save ourselves from our own negligence. I tell students, “Don’t pray to God to help you get an A on a test. Study!” In other words, don’t ask God to do for you what you can do for yourself. But there are some things we can’t do and prayer is a way of acknowledging that God is sovereign and in control.

So if God is in control, why do we pray? Is it really going to make a difference? Yes, it does. I can say that because I’ve been on the receiving end of prayers. I’m not a touchy-feely kind of guy, but when I knew I had people praying for me, I felt it. I can’t explain what the felt

like – again, our words fall short – but I knew I was being prayed for and that gave me a sense of peace and strength to persevere.

Prayer not only makes a difference for the people being prayed for, but also for the person saying the prayer. Prayer is our way of conversing with God, of nurturing and deepening our connection to God. When we pray, we are daring to share with God those concerns that keep us awake at night or those fears that we can't tell anyone else. There is no safer place to share what delights us and worries us most than in prayer. Prayer is simply a conversation between you and God. Dallas Willard said, "Prayer is talking with God about what we are doing together." Prayer allows us to be in an ongoing relationship with God.

To have that relationship, we have to communicate. When I'm at work, Leigh and I talk on the phone several times a day. Sometimes is to catch up, sometimes she tells me something funny one of the girls said, sometimes she tells me to pick up something on my way home. These are your typical daily conversations, nothing earth-shattering. But in the consistency of our communication, we maintain our relationship.

During the course of our day, we have the opportunity to shift our orientation from ourselves and our lives to God. This can be a simple pause in the midst of the day to give a word of thanks. It doesn't matter the situation, there's always a reason to pray. To give thanks for making it home safely. To ask God to heal a loved one who is sick. To lift up people in other countries. To praise God for our families. Or, simply to say thank you for God's continuing presence with us.

We pray because we believe in something and Someone greater than this world has to offer. We pray because we actually believe God can do what the Bible says God can do. Heal the sick? Change the world? Move mountains? Can God really do that? I mean, really? I don't know. Do you believe God can? If so, pray like you believe it. Pray like you have hope. Pray. Pray.